

Grammatical sketch of Zenaga

by Miikka Alhonen, updated 20/12/2018

Disclaimer: This document is a work in progress. It represents the best of my current understanding of how the language works based on several sources, some written, others oral, together representing all the three dialects of modern Zenaga (Oulad Dayman, Idablahsen and Tendgha). When alternative forms are known to me, I will usually try to give the form used among Oulad Dayman since it appears the most conservative of the three dialects. Due to the insufficient access to native speakers this far, not all data has been verified and could well contain mistakes, especially in terms of accuracy of transcription. I haven't marked any of my sources, either, but I've greatly benefited from Catherine Taine-Cheikh's two dictionaries and Mokhtarould Hamidoun's grammatical description and texts as well as my prior knowledge of Tamasheq and Tashelhit and the various interviews I have personally had with Zenaga speakers from Oulad Dayman (Oulad Bou Maija, Idendahend, Oulad Barikalla, Idabhoun) and Tendgha (Idjawadj). This document is not meant for publication in its present form.

Orthographic key

Symbol	IPA	Other sources	Arabic	Example
θ	ð, θ	z, th	ث	awgθiħ ‘son’
θ̣	ð̣, θ̣ ^y	ẓ, th	N/A	tuθah ‘nine’
ð	ð̣	ð̣, ð̣, dh	ذ	kayð ‘what’
ð̣	ð̣ ^y	ð̣, ð̣, dh	ظ	tarbað ‘girl’
s	s	s, ss	س	yaskar ‘to make, do’
ʂ	s ^y	ʂ	ص	aʂ ‘day’
z	z	z	ز	yazga ‘to hold’
ẓ	ẓ ^y	ẓ	N/A	yaruzga ‘to bless’
ʃ	ʃ	ʃ, sh, ch	ش	ʃaṃmuʃ ‘five’
ʒ	ʒ	ʒ, j	ج	yaʒžinʒah ‘to sell’
č	tʃ	t ^y , tch	تش	amajjawkuč ‘friend’
j	dʒ~dʒ̣	d ^y , dj	چ	waʒjah ‘very’
t	t	t	ت	taatən ‘sheep’
ṭ	ṭ ^y	ṭ	ط	taayāt ‘paper’
d	d	d	د	daað ‘here’
ḍ	ḍ ^y	ḍ	ض	tuð ‘eye’
ñ	ɲ	ɲ ^y	N/A	ʃiññ aanan ‘two tents’
h	ħ	h	ه	arabih ‘boy’
ħ	ħ̣	ħ̣	ح	aʃhah ‘healthy’
x	χ	ħ̣, kh	خ	yuxsar ‘to break’
ɣ	ʁ	g̣, gh	ع	yuyjaj ‘to forget’
k	k	k	ك	okkuθ ‘four’
g	g	g	ك	marag ‘ten’
q	q	q	ق	yaqquffah ‘to get angry’
ʕ	ʕ	ε, ʕ	ع	assaaʕað ‘now’
ʔ	ʔ	ʔ, ʔ	ء	iʔmi ‘sit down’
w	w	w	و	war ‘not’
y	j	y	ي	yuʔlli ‘there is’
ɓ	b ^w	ɓ	N/A	ʒoɓɓa ‘red’
ɱ	m ^w	ɱ	N/A	aṃullij ‘sugar’
a	a~æ	a, ä, e	—	waʔr ‘lion’
i	i	i, ə	ا	yiʔša ‘to buy’
u	u	u, ou	—	yuktab ‘to write’
o	o	o	N/A	oʔfš ‘on him’
ə	ə	ə	N/A	tət ‘truth’
aa	a:	ā	ا	araawah ‘ʕayš porridge’
ii	i:	ī	ي	iiði ‘dog’
uu	u:	ū	و	uukšan ‘teeth’
ay	ej	äy, ay, ē ^y	ي	waygi ‘is not’
aw	ow	ō ^w	و	billawṃalli ‘slowly’

In further analysis, [ə] will probably turn out to be an allophone of either /a/ or /i/ but this needs to be verified. Taine-Cheikh uses a special symbol <ž> to describe a “relaxed” /ž/, i.e. IPA [ʒ̣] but I have this far not heard the sound with my own ears. Among Tendgha, this [ẓ̌] seems to have evolved into [h], and among Oulad Dayman, it seems to be indistinguishable from a regular /ž/. In my informants’ speech, /ɣ/ is a clear fricative and /f/ is constantly voiceless, unlike in most modern Hassaniya, where /ɣ/ > /q/ and /f/ > /v/.¹

1 Even for vocabulary derived from Arabic, the pronunciation is clearly different in the two languages. For ‘peace’, I have heard the same speaker say [əlʕaavya] in Hassaniya and translate it to [alʕaafiya] in Zenaga.

Noun morphology

Determiners

Similarly to all other Berber languages, Zenaga doesn't have any morphological difference between definite and indefinite forms, i.e. there are no articles. In syntax, however, other Berber languages do display differences between conceptually definite and indefinite forms, for instance in terms of word order and the use of demonstratives.

Demonstratives are postposed to nouns and seem to display a three-way distinction between proximate, medial and distal. None of the demonstratives vary in gender and only the proximate varies in number.

aji'm-að	'this camel'	i'jman-ið	'these camels'
aji'm-i'ð	'that camel (referred, close by)'	i'jman-i'ð	'those camels (referred, close by)'
aji'm-aan	'that camel (over there)'	i'jman-aan	'those camels (over there)'

The same demonstrative elements are also used in basic adverbs of place and movement.

daað	'here'	dawr-að	'towards here'
da'ð	'over there'		
šaað	'there (at some distance)'		
šaan	'there (far away)'	awr-aan	'towards there'

The proximate demonstrative is equally found in reflexive pronouns 'myself, yourself' etc.

ni'ka-yað	'as for me, myself'
kuk-að	'as for you, yourself (m.)'

Independent demonstratives, which also have a three-way distinction, vary in gender and number.

að	'this one (m.)'	a'ð	'that one (close by, m.)'
tað	'this one (f.)'	ta'ð	'that one (close by, f.)'
iðnið	'these ones (m.)'	iðni'ð	'those ones (close by, m.)'
tiðnið	'these ones (f.)'	tiðni'ð	'those ones (close by, f.)'
aan	'that one (over there, m.)'		
taan	'that one (over there, f.)'		
iðnaan	'those ones (over there, m.)'		
tiðnaan	'those ones (over there, f.)'		

Gender and number

There are two genders: masculine and feminine. Most masculines start with a- and most feminines with ta-, although there are some exceptions. Many feminines have -t, -ð, -ð or -h at the end of the word but not all.²

² Historically most feminines had a -t but in many cases it has coalesced with the previous consonant, e.g. *to'ḥbalt > *to'ḥball > to'ḥbal 'female slave' as opposed to *o'ḥbal > o'ḥbaj 'male slave' (a single *l usually changes into j whereas a double *ll stays as ll). In the feminine plural, the non-coalesced consonant reappears: to'ḥbajin 'female slaves'.

a'žij	'donkey' (m.)	tawgθit	'daughter' (f.)
amarθih	'back' (m.)	tiθini'θ	'tidinit' (f.)
aṃullij	'sugar' (m.)	taxsah	'belly' (f.)
iin	'tent' (m.)	tawrəs	'road' (f.)
gahũuh	'hyena' (m.)	yumṃih	'mother' (f.)

Regular plurals are formed by changing the first vowel of the word from a > i / u or i / u > a, and adding an ending: -an for masculines and -in / -ayn / -a'n for feminines. Vowels within the word often change, as well. If the singular word ends in the feminine -t, it drops before the plural ending. For feminine words, the final consonant of the word often changes in the plural.

azgər > izgaran	'ox' (m.)	tayayart > tyayarin	'baby goat' (f.)
ađari > iđaran	'star' (m.)	tawgθit > tugθayn	'daughter' (f.)
agađij > uguđajan	'White Moor' (m.)	taffu'gi'θ > tfu'ga'n	'calf, baby cow' (f.)
il > alluun	'river, sea' (m.)	ta'žil > tu'žajin	'she-ass' (f.)
aş > uşşan	'day' (m.)	tawrəs > tu'rša'n	'road' (f.)

For some masculine words, the initial vowel doesn't change.

arabih > arabaan	'boy' (m.)
ij > ijjan	'man' (m.)
i'ži > i'žan	'fly' (m.)

For nouns beginning with a consonant (other than the feminine t-) and for some older loanwords from Arabic, plurals are often formed with the prefix iθ.

baabah > iθbawbah	'father' (m.)
yumṃih > iθyumṃih	'mother' (f.)
ačfaya > iθačfaya	'marabout, old man' (m., from Arabic al-faqih)

Singular diminutives are formed by an aḡ- prefix for masculines and ča- for feminines. Both genders take the typical feminine ending -t, -θ, -θ, -h or a sound change. All diminutives form their plurals with the -iin ending. Simultaneously, the masculine diminutive prefix changes from aḡ-/ab- to ayθ-.

aḡrabaθ > ayθrabiin	'small boy' (m.)
abbajmuθ > ayθajmuđan	'student' (m.)
čaarabaθ > čaarabiin	'small girl' (f.)

Nouns borrowed from Hassaniya often form their plurals like in the source language.

mandriiš > mnaadriiš	'squirrel' (m.)
şanduug > şnaadiig	'box' (m.)

Some commonly used words have suppletive plurals, which are etymologically unrelated to the singular form, or at least have a very irregular derivation.

ta'd > uullan	'goat' (f.), 'goats' (m.)
tijih > taatən	'sheep' (f.)

Some nouns, especially names of some common liquids, appear only in their plural form with no corresponding singulars.

aman	‘water’ (m. pl.)
aḏamman	‘blood’ (m. pl.)

Others, so-called collective nouns, refer to plural concepts but are grammatically singular.

ta’ḏas	‘mosquitoes’ (f. sg.)
ta’maḏ	‘termites’ (f. sg.)
amazḏah	‘spider, spiders’ (m. sg.)

Noun possession

Noun possession is usually marked with the clitic *ən* placed between the two nouns, similarly to the English ‘of’. As in English, many preposition-like constructions are formed this way.

i’šm <i>ən</i> ačfaya	“name of teacher”, i.e. ‘the name of the teacher’
aawaj <i>ən</i> ta’rbət	“language of Arabic”, i.e. ‘Hassaniya’
anz <i>ən</i> tuḏ	“hair of eye”, i.e. ‘eyelash’
baaba n arabih	“father of boy”, i.e. ‘the boy’s father’
affalla n aji’m	“top of camel”, i.e. ‘on top of the camel’
tajma n ayma’k	“likeness of your brother”, i.e. ‘like your brother’

If the first element of the possessive phrase is a word which already ends in *-n*, such as most plurals, the two nouns follow each other directly with no intervening *ən*.

aman ajmošši	“blade (of) knife”, i.e. ‘the blade of the knife’
uḡḡaan aadəm	“sons (of) Adam”, i.e. ‘humans’

If the first element ends in a vowel (not *-h*), an additional ‘ sound is often added before the *ən* particle.

i’ssi’ n ašša’far	“grain of medicine”, i.e. ‘medicine pill’
aggi’ n aḡuḏ	“side of well”, i.e. ‘next to the well’

Historically, the second noun of the possessive phrase was inflected in a special form called the construct form (in French, *état d’annexion*), which was characterized by a word-initial *w* or *y*, mostly depending on the initial vowel of the word (*w* before *a*, and *y* before *i*). In addition, all masculine plurals had *y-* in the construct form. Although this mark has now mostly disappeared, it affects the *ən* particle by changing it to *əññ* (< **ən* + *y*) before certain words. This feature is particularly prominent in the dialect of the Oulad Dayman.³

aawaj <i>əññ</i> uḡnagan	“language of Zenagas”, i.e. ‘the Zenaga language’
aḡmaš <i>əññ</i> iin	“inside of tent”, i.e. ‘inside the tent’

Possessive pronouns

Historically, pronoun possession was marked similarly to noun possession, i.e. noun + *ən* + pronoun suffix. This construction is still generally used in the dialect of Idablahsen, whereas the two other dialects seem to have lost the *ən* particle at least in some forms, leaving behind only

³ In many place names, even the *w-* element seems to have been conserved, i.e. Nouamghar on the coast between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou < n wamyar ‘of the old man’ from n + amyār ‘old man’. In modern Zenaga, the corresponding expression seems to be n amyār without the intervening *w-*.

noun + pronoun suffix. These are the different possessive pronouns attached to the words a'l 'place' in the singular and i'f 'head, self' in both singular and plural:

a'll-i'n	my place	i'f-i'n	'myself'
a'll-ik	your (m. sg.) place	i'f-i'k	'yourself (m. sg.)'
a'll-innam	your (f. sg.) place	i'f-innam	'yourself (f. sg.)'
a'll-iš	his / her place	i'f-iš	'himself, herself'
a'll-inna'n	our place	o'fuun-na'n	'ourselves'
a'll-innuun	your (m. pl.) place	o'fuun-nuun	'yourselves (m.)'
a'll-innaðkammað	your (f. pl.) place	o'fuun-naðkammað	'yourselves (f.)'
a'll-iššan	their (m.) place	o'fuun-šan	'themselves (m.)'
a'll-iššiññað	their (f.) place	o'fuun-šiññað	'themselves (f.)'

If the noun ends in a vowel or h, the initial i- of the suffix is deleted. As with noun possession, an additional ' is added between the vowel ending and the suffix. Sometimes the last vowel of the noun also change.

baaba-'n	my father (< baabah 'father')
yumma-'n	my mother (< yumḡih 'mother')
aggi'-š	his side, next to him (< aggi 'side')

For independent possessive pronouns, similar to English 'mine, yours' etc., the dummy noun inn- is used with a slightly different set of suffixes. Together with the independent pronoun, these forms can be used to mean 'alone'.

inn-u'h	mine
inn-akuk	yours (m. sg.)
inn-akum	yours (f. sg.)
inn-ih	his
inn-ayað	hers
inn-akkan	ours
inn-attan	yours (m. pl.)
inn-akammað	yours (f. pl.)
inn-iðan	theirs (m. pl.)
inn-iðaññað	theirs (f. pl.)
inta inn-ih	he alone
inta'hað inn-ayað	she alone

Prepositions

Pronominal arguments for prepositions are marked with suffixes, which are mostly similar to the possessive suffixes, though without the possessive n element.

o'f-i'n	'on me'	ar-i'n	'from me, at me'
o'f-ki	'on you (m. sg.)'	ar-ki	'from you (m. sg.), at you (m. sg.)'
o'f-kam	'on you (f. sg.)'	ar-kam	'from you (f. sg.), at you (f. sg.)'
o'f-š	'on him / her'	ar-š	'from him, at him'
o'f-nag	'on us'	ar-nag	'from us, at us'
o'f-kuun	'on you (m. pl.)'	ar-kuun	'from you (m. pl.), at you (m. pl.)'
o'f-kammað	'on you (f. pl.)'	ar-kammað	'from you (f. pl.), at you (f. pl.)'
o'f-šan	'on them (m.)'	ar-šan	'from them (m.pl.), at them (m. pl.)'
o'f-šaññað	'on them (f.)'	ar-šaññað	'from them (f. pl.), at them (f. pl.)'

Sometimes the pronominal forms of prepositions are different from the independent forms.

š	'with (an instrument), by'
ša'r-i'n	'by me'
ša'r-iš	'by him / her / it'
dag	'in'
da'-š	'in him / her / it'
addaað	'under'
addaa-š	'under him / her / it'

With prepositions, the first person singular marker can often be abbreviated to /ih/.

ayð-i'n / ayðn-ih	'in front of me'
iið-i'n / iið-ih	'with me'

A few preposition-like particles take the independent form of pronouns instead of a suffix.

šawšað nitni	'all the way up to you (m. pl.)'
maššaar kuk	'except you'
Muhand d inta	'as for Muhand'

Verb morphology

Preterite and aorist

Morphologically, there are three main tense-aspect-mood (TAM) combinations in Zenaga, which are conventionally called the preterite, the aorist and the aorist intensive. For verbs with 2–3 stem consonants, the preterite is characterized by the vowel sequence u–a or i–a, depending on the phonetic environment.

yuktab	‘he wrote’
yu’gar	‘he stole’
yubḥaḏ	‘he jumped’
yi’ša	‘he bought’
yinag	‘he rode’

The aorist is otherwise identical to the preterite except that the vowel sequence is reversed: a–u or a–i depending on the neighboring sounds. In some phonetic environments, /a/ can also vary with /o/.

yaktub	‘that he writes’
yo’gir	‘that he steals’
yabḥuḏ	‘that he jumps’
ya’ši	‘that he buys’
yanig	‘that he rides’

For some verbs, the preterite and the aorist are identical, often with a vowel pattern which is atypical of both.

ya’raar	‘he played’ = ‘that he plays’
yaṃṃih	‘he died’ = ‘that he dies’

For some other verbs, the preterite and the aorist are different from each other but do not follow the typical vowel pattern.

yaḏbaah ≠ yaḏbiih	‘he went’ ≠ ‘that he goes’
yaskar ≠ yaskir	‘he did’ ≠ ‘that he does’
ya’ma ≠ yi’mi	‘he sat’ ≠ ‘that he sits’
yawga ≠ yuugi	‘he worked’ ≠ ‘that he works’
yuzza’r ≠ yuzzu’r	‘he saw’ ≠ ‘that he sees’
yaffuḏ ≠ yuffuḏ	‘he is thirsty’ ≠ ‘that he is thirsty’

For verbs with only one stem consonant, the preterite typically has /a/ and the aorist /i/ for all the vowels.⁴

yaa’ ≠ yii’	‘he is there’ ≠ ‘that he is there’
yaag ≠ yiig	‘he is sick’ ≠ ‘that he is sick’
yaara ≠ yiiri	‘he wants’ ≠ ‘that he wants’

⁴ In these examples, the first form is morphologically a preterite although the English translation has a present tense.

For verbs with more than 3 stem consonants, and thus at least 3 vowels, the first and the last vowel are typically /a/ for the preterite and /i/ or /u/ for the aorist, whereas the middle vowel is variable.

yaşşumḡah ≠ yuşşumḡih	‘he slept’ ≠ ‘that he sleeps’
yaşşaaawaj ≠ yişşiiwij	‘he spoke’ ≠ ‘that he speaks’
yaşwaḡaah ≠ yişwaḡiih	‘he sent’ ≠ ‘that he sends’
yamkannaah ≠ yumkunniih	‘he agreed’ ≠ ‘that he agrees’
yajija ≠ yijiji	‘he was born’ ≠ ‘that he is born’

Aorist intensive

The aorist intensive is morphologically more complex, and it can be formed in one of three ways: 1) by doubling the middle consonant of a three-consonant root, sometimes with an accompanying sound change, 2) adding a tt- prefix, 3) adding a y- prefix. The third derivation is used mainly for verbs related to movement. Some verbs have several possible ways of forming the aorist intensive.

yikattab	‘he writes’ (1)
yitta’gar	‘he steals’ (2)
yaybbaḡ	‘he jumps’ (3)
ya’ssa	‘he buys’ (1 with sound change)
yinnag / yittanag	‘he rides’ (1 or 2)

For verbs with more than three consonants, the aorist intensive is usually formed with a t- prefix, which can be either single or double, depending on the phonetic environment. With these verbs, the vowels of the aorist intensive often follow the aorist.

yaffuṣṣa ≠ yitfuṣṣi	‘he fell silent’ ≠ ‘he is silent’
yamkannaah ≠ yittumkunniih	‘he agreed’ ≠ ‘he agrees’

With derived verbs whose stem begins with a sibilant sound (š, ž, s, z), the t- prefix is assimilated to the sibilant, leaving the aorist intensive and the preterite only minimally differentiated by their first vowel: /a/ for the preterite, /i/ for the aorist intensive. This class of verbs includes mostly causatives.

yažžinžah ≠ yižžinžah	‘he bought’ ≠ ‘he buys’
yaşşaaawaj ≠ yişşaaawaj	‘he spoke’ ≠ ‘he speaks’
yaşnag ≠ yişnag	‘he made someone ride’ ≠ ‘he makes someone ride’

Some verbs have a suppletive aorist intensive, which is completely different from the preterite and the aorist.

yuffa ≠ yoffi ≠ yaakka	‘he gave’ ≠ ‘that he gives’ ≠ ‘he gives’
yičša ≠ yačši ≠ yittatta	‘he ate’ ≠ ‘that he eats’ ≠ ‘he eats’
yişba ≠ yaşbi ≠ yiḡassa	‘he drank’ ≠ ‘that he drinks’ ≠ ‘he drinks’
yinnah ≠ yizzin ≠ yinabbah	‘he said’ ≠ ‘that he says’ ≠ ‘he says’

Subject marking

Similarly to Semitic languages including Arabic, pronominal subjects are marked as prefixes, suffixes or circumfixes around the verb stem. Unlike Arabic, these markers are constant for all tenses.⁵

t-uktab-að	'you (sg.) wrote' (preterite)
t-aktub-að	'that you (sg.) write' (aorist)
t-ikattab-að	'you (sg.) write' (aorist intensive)

The following are the different subject markers. Notice that, unlike Arabic, gender is not differentiated in the 2nd person singular but it is regularly marked in the plurals (unlike e.g. Hassaniya). Unlike Semitic languages, the 2nd person singular and the 3rd person feminine singular are differentiated from each other.⁶ A word-initial vowel in an open syllable is often deleted if no subject marker precedes it.

uktab-ag	'I wrote'	kattab-ag	'I write'
t-uktab-að	'you (sg.) wrote'	t-ikattab-að	'you (sg.) write'
y-uktab	'he wrote'	y-ikattab	'he writes'
t-uktab	'she wrote'	t-ikattab	'she writes'
n-uktab	'we wrote'	n-ikattab	'we write'
t-uktab-am	'you (m. pl.) wrote'	t-ikattab-am	'you (m. pl.) write'
t-uktab-ammað	'you (f. pl.) wrote'	t-ikattab-ammað	'you (f. pl.) write'
uktab-an	'they (m. pl.) wrote'	kattab-an	'they (m. pl.) write'
uktab-əññað	'they (f. pl.) wrote'	kattab-əññað	'they (f. pl.) write'

With verbs ending in a vowel, a ' sound is added before the plural subject suffixes, whereas in the singular, the vowels just coalesce.

uff-ag	'I gave'
t-uff-að	'you (sg.) gave'
y-uffa	'he gave'
t-uffa	'she gave'
n-uffa	'we gave'
t-uffa-'m	'you (m. pl.) gave'
t-uffa-'mmað	'you (f. pl.) gave'
uffa-'n	'they (m. pl.) gave'
uffa-'ññað	'they (f. pl.) gave'

With verbs ending in h, the h is deleted before a suffix. With some verbs, the preceding vowel is lengthened, with others it stays short.

y-ižjah	'he threw'	y-awrih	'he worked'
ižj-aan	'they threw'	awr-an	'they worked'
y-aðbaah	'he went'		
aðb-aan	'they went'		

⁵ In Arabic, the past tense is formed with suffixes whereas the present tense is a combination of prefixes and circumfixes: katab-tum 'you (m.pl.) wrote' vs. ta-ktub-uuna 'you (m.pl.) write'.

⁶ In Arabic, the 2nd person masculine singular and the 3rd person feminine singular have the same form in the present tense: t-aktubu 'you (m. sg.) write' or 'she writes'.

Imperative

The imperative is formed on the aorist stem by removing all prefixes. The singular imperative form has no suffix, either.

aktub	‘write (sg.)!’
aktub-am	‘write (m. pl.)!’
aktub-əmmað	‘write (f. pl.)!’

The imperatives can be augmented with a marker for the first person plural and the proximate directional marker to include the speaker in the command.

aðbiih	‘go (sg.)’
aðbiih-a’nag-dah	‘let’s go, you (sg.) and me’
aðbaam	‘go (m. pl.)’
aðbaam-a’nag-dah	‘let’s go, you (m. pl.) and me’

Imperatives are usually negated with the að particle + war + aorist.

að war taktub	‘Don’t write (sg.)!’
að war tayjijam	‘Don’t forget (m. pl.)!’

A peculiar form characteristic of Berber and some other languages of the region, such as Pulaar, is the habitual imperative, which is formed with the particle aar + aorist intensive.

aar tisakkarað	‘Do continuously (sg.)!’
aan-na tittassað	‘Keep on visiting there (sg.)!’

The same form can be used in other persons to express a wish. As with the negative particle, the final r coalesces with a following y to become ll.

aall iyara	‘May he study regularly!’ (<*aar yiyara)
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The corresponding negative form takes the particle war and the aorist intensive with no prefixes. Like the simple imperative, the singular form doesn’t take any suffixes, either.

war sakkar	‘Don’t do (sg.)!’
war sakkar-am	‘Don’t do (m. pl.)!’

For two commands in a row, the first verb is usually in the imperative whereas the second takes the aorist form.

andiih tammagriyað	‘Go and return (sg.)!’
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Direct objects

Pronominal direct objects are marked with suffixes on the verb or on another verbal element preceding it (see Negation below). With direct objects, the 2nd person singulars are differentiated in gender, unlike with subject marking.

yuzza’r-i’n	‘he saw me’
yuzza’r-ki	‘he saw you (m. sg.)’

yuzza'r-kam	'he saw you (f. sg.)'
yuzza'r-ti	'he saw him'
yuzza'r-taḏ	'he saw her'
yuzza'r-a'nag	'he saw us'
yuzza'r-kuun	'he saw you (m. pl.)'
yuzza'r-kemmaḏ	'he saw you (f. pl.)'
yuzza'r-tan	'he saw them (m. pl.)'
yuzza'r-təññaḏ	'he saw them (f. pl.)'

With first person singular subjects, the subject marker changes phonetically before 3 person object suffixes from -ag to -a. Suffixes beginning with /t/ change the initial sound to /ḏ/.

uzza'rag	'I saw'
uzza'rak-ki	'I saw you (m. sg.)'
uzza'rak-kam	'I saw you (f. sg.)'
uzza'ra-ḏi	'I saw him'
uzza'ra-ḏaḏ	'I saw her'

Even in other cases, object suffixes beginning with /t/ often coalesce with the previous consonant sound or spirantize after a vowel. After vowels, /k/ also changes into /g/.

yugraah	'he heard'
yugraa-ḏi	'he heard him'
yuḡaḏ	'he filled'
yuḡaḏ-ḏi	'he filled it (m.)'
yuffaḡ	'he chewed'
yuffaz-zi	'he chewed it (m.)'
yiddaḗ	'he ground'
yiddaz-zi	'he ground it (m.)'
yumaj	'he went towards' (Hassaniya gaas)
yumal-li	'he went towards him'
tuzza'raḏ	'you (m. sg.) saw'
tuzza'rad-di	'you (m. sg.) saw him'
yukta	'he is better'
yukta-gi	'he is better than you (m. sg.)'

Quite exceptionally, the third person object pronouns also change radically after verb forms ending in a vowel (not -h). If there is an intervening subject suffix, this change does not happen.

yi'na	'he killed'
yi'n-i'n	'he killed him'
yi'n-yaḏ	'he killed her'
yi'n-nan	'he killed them (m. pl.)'
yi'n-iññaḏ	'he killed them (f. pl.)'
ti'naḏ	'you (sg.) killed'
ti'nad-di	'you (sg.) killed him'
ti'nad-daḏ	'you (sg.) killed her'
ti'nad-dan	'you (sg.) killed them (m. pl.)'
ti'nad-dəññaḏ	'you (sg.) killed them (f. pl.)'

With some rare verbs, an additional /t/ or /ð/ sound is added between the vowel ending of the verb and a following object suffix.

yugah	'he went past'
yugat-ti	'he went past him'
yugað-ki	'he went past you (m. sg.)'

Indirect objects

Pronominal indirect objects are likewise added as suffixes to the verb or another verbal element. The marker for the first person plural is the same as for direct objects. In some dialects (at least Idablansen), even the first person singular mark is the same for direct and indirect objects. Notice that the 3rd person singular is not differentiated for gender.

yuff-i'ð	'he gave to me'
yuff-aag	'he gave to you (m. sg.)'
yuff-aam	'he gave to you (f. sg.)'
yuff-aaš	'he gave to him / her'
yuff-a'nag	'he gave to us'
yuff-aaguun	'he gave to you (m. pl.)'
yuff-aagammað	'he gave to you (f. pl.)'
yuff-aašan	'he gave to them (m. pl.)'
yuff-aašəññað	'he gave to them (f. pl.)'

With first person singular subjects, the subject marker and the indirect object coalesce: -ag + -aa > -a'.

uffag	'I gave'
uffa-'g	'I gave to you (m. sg.)'
uffa-'m	'I gave to you (f. sg.)'
uffa-'š	'I gave to him / her'

If a verb has both a direct and an indirect object, the indirect object always precedes. In some cases, the two suffixes coalesce phonetically.

yuff-aag-ti	'he gave it (m.) to you (m. sg.)'
yuff-aag-tað	'he gave it (f.) to you (m. sg.)'
yuff-aas-si	'he gave it (m.) to him' (< *yuff-aaš-ti)
yuff-aas-sað	'he gave it (f.) to him' (< *yuff-aaš-tað)
ti'šað-i'-di	'you bought it (m.) for me' (< *ti'šað-i'ð-ti)

Directional marking

A peculiarity of all Berber languages, including Zenaga, is that in addition to markers for direct objects and indirect objects, verbs can also be marked for directionality of action, i.e. whether the actions happens towards the subject (here) or away from him / her (there). For some verbs, directional marking is an obligatory part of the verb itself, for others it just brings more precision. The two markers are dah (towards the subject) and nah (away from the subject), although in different contexts they have several phonetic forms.

yijja	'he left sth' (place not defined)
yijja-ddah	'he left sth here'

yijja-nnah	'he left sth there'
iššag-dah	'I came' (the form *iššag by itself does not exist)
tiššad-dah	'you (sg.) came'
yišša-ddah	'he came'
išša'n-dah	'they came'

If the verb has a direct object, the directional mark follows it. If the previous marker is either /ti/ or /ki/, the directional marker appears in an abbreviated form.

ti'šađ	'you (sg.) bought'
ti'šad-di	'you (sg.) bought it (m.)'
ti'šad-di-’đ	'you (sg.) bought it (m.) here'
ti'šad-di-'n	'you (sg.) bought it (m.) there'
ti'šađ-i-'di-'n	'you (sg.) bought it (m.) for me there'

If the verb is followed by a short prepositional expression, it can be placed either before or after the directional marker with no change in meaning. In the former case, the directional marker can be abbreviated as above.

u'rag ša'r-ki	'I called (on) you.'
u'rag-dah ša'r-ki	'I called you here.' (directional marker first)
u'rag ša'r-ki-'đ	'I called you here.' (prepositional phrase first)
iššag-dah o'f-ki	'I came on you.' (i.e. while you were still present)
iššag o'f-ki-'đ	'I came on you.'

Negation

Verbs are negated in all tenses with the particle war. When it precedes a /y/ sound (as in the 3rd person masculine singular), the two coalesce: r + y > ll. Similarly, r + n produces nn.

war uktubag	'I didn't write'
war tissinađ	'you didn't know'
wall ukšum	'he didn't enter' (< *war yukšum)
wall ittilliih	'he doesn't search' (< *war yittilliih)
wan nađbiih	'we didn't go' (< *war nađbiih)

The negated verb forms are usually different from the corresponding affirmative forms. Whereas the preterite and the aorist usually have at least one /a/ vowel, the negated preterite has only /i/ or /u/.

yi'ša	'he bought' (preterite)
ya'ši	'that he buys' (aorist)
wall i'ši	'he didn't buy' (preterite negative)
yaḅḅuđ	'he jumped' (preterite)
yubḅađ	'that he jumps' (aorist)
wall uḅḅuđ	'he didn't jump' (preterite negative)

Similarly, the negated aorist intensive has a preponderance of /i/ and /u/ vowels.

yiššaawaj	'he speaks' (aorist intensive)
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wall iššiiwij 'he doesn't speak' (aorist intensive negative)

With negated forms, the direct object, the indirect object and the directional mark are suffixed directly to the negative particle war, which makes the surface negative form appear very different from the affirmative.

uzza'rak-ki	'I saw you (m. sg.)'
yuzza'r-ti	'he saw him'
war-k uzzu'rag	'I didn't see you (m. sg.)'
war-ti yuzzu'r	'he didn't see him'
iššag-dah	'I came'
yišša-ddah	'he came'
war-ð iššag	'I didn't come'
war-ða yišši	'he didn't come'
inna-ði	'I said it (m.)'
inna-'g-ti	'I said it (m.) to you (m. sg.)'
war-t innag	'I didn't say it (m.)'
war-aag-t innag	'I didn't say it (m.) to you (m. sg.)'

Participles

Participles can be formed on the preterite stem as well as the aorist intensive. With both forms, the participle obligatorily includes one of the third person subject markers and the participle marker -an. In the plural, there is no distinction of gender.

yuktab-an	'who (m. sg.) wrote' (preterite)
tuktab-an	'who (f. sg.) wrote'
uktab-nin	'who (pl.) wrote'
yikattab-an	'who (m. sg.) writes' (aorist intensive)

Verbs with a vowel ending take an additional ' sound before the participle marker.

yiɣara-'n 'who reads' (aorist intensive)

Adjectives

Most qualifying words which describe permanent or temporary states in Zenaga behave and conjugate exactly like verbs, with full subject marking and all tenses.

armaššag	'I am kind'
tarmaššað	'you (sg.) are kind'
yarmašša	'he is kind'

A limited number (< 100) of qualifiers, however, have a particular adjectival conjugation, which is similar to verbs but lacks prefixes altogether.

mašk-ag	'I am small'	ayna-g	'I am new'
*mašk-að?	'you (sg.) are small'	*ayna-ð?	'you (sg.) are new'
mašk	'he is small'	aynah	'he is new'
mašk-að	'she is small'	ayna-ðað	'she is new'

maṣk-əðəð	‘we are small’	ayn-əðəð	‘we are new’
maṣk-am	‘you (m. pl.) are small’	*ayna-m?	‘you (m. pl.) are new’
*maṣk-əmmað?	‘you (f. pl.) are small’	*ayna-mmað?	‘you (f. pl.) are new’
maṣk-an	‘they (m.) are small’	ayn-əðəð	‘they (m.) are new’
*maṣk-əññað?	‘they (f.) are small’	*ayna-ññað?	‘they (f.) are new’

Since adjectives lack subject prefixes, even the corresponding participle forms are undifferentiated in gender, though a number distinction remains. Similarly to verbs, adjectival participles are used to qualify nouns within the same noun phrase.

ijj maṣk-an	‘a small man’
tanaščamt maṣk-an	‘a small woman’
ijjan maṣk-an-in	‘small men’
tanaššijman maṣk-an-in	‘small women’
itsan aynað-nin	‘new clothes’

Comparatives

Morphological comparatives such as the Arabic kabiir ‘big’ – ‘akbar ‘bigger’ don’t exist in Zenaga. Some verbs have an implicit comparative meaning for a specific domain.

inta yama’r i ačfaya-’š	‘He is older than his teacher.’
kum tiðrad-dað	‘You (f. sg.) are prettier than her.’
nikni nukt-i’ð	‘We are better than him.’
iin-i’n yilla-ðah iin-ik	‘My tent is closer than your tent.’

For other qualities, verbs like yugar ‘to be bigger’ or yizzah ‘to be longer’ are used together with a nominal form such as the verbal noun.

yugar ayma-š taqwað	‘‘He is bigger than his brother in strength’’, i.e. ‘He is stronger.’
yugar-ti tamθih	‘‘He is bigger than him in smallness’’, i.e. ‘He is younger.’
yizza-ði tayri’ð	‘‘He is longer than him in learning’’, i.e. ‘He knows better.’

Causatives

Common to all Afro-Asiatic languages, verbs can be augmented with additional morphemes to create derived stems, of which the causative is probably one of the most common and most productive. In Zenaga, it usually consists of a sibilant sound followed by the underived stem. The default sibilant is a geminated /šš/ but if the underived stem has another sibilant, the causative marker usually assimilates to it. Since /θ/ and /θ/ historically derive from /z/ and /z/, these sounds can alternate both in the causative marker and the stem.

yukšar ‘to come down’	>	yəššakšar ‘to take down’
yamtattag ‘to move by itself’	>	yaššəmtattag ‘to move sth’
yažannah ‘to go crazy’	>	yažəžannah ‘to make sbdy crazy’
yaθum ‘to fast’	>	yažzuθam ‘to make sbdy fast’
yizgar ‘to come out’	>	yaθizgar ‘to make sth come out’
yiθrag ‘to draw water’	>	yaθəθrag ‘to send sbdy to draw water’

Contrarily, stems with /š/ seem to display a case of dissimilation, where the causative marker is often a voiced /ž/.

yišba 'to drink' > yažišba 'to make sbdy drink'
yiššar 'to get mixed' > yažiššar 'to mix sth'

With some stems /ss/ seems to be the marker of choice.

yuyra 'to read, to study' > yassuyra 'to teach'
yugma 'to grow, to become big' > yassigma 'to make sbdy grow'

Causatives can also be formed from adjective and noun stems.

žoḅḅa 'red' > yažižba 'to make red'
aawaj 'speech' > yaššaawaj 'to speak'
aga'fah 'north' > yažga'fah 'to go north'

In common with other Berber languages, simple stems in Zenaga often have a passive meaning, which is then made active with the causative marker.

yinžah 'to be sold' > yažžinžah 'to sell'
yanfij 'to be exchanged' > yaššanfaj 'to exchange'

Passives

Another common derivation is the passive, which in Zenaga is formed with the čč- prefix.

yuktab 'to write' > yaččaktab 'to be written'
yugraah 'to hear' > yaččagraah 'to be heard'
yi'ša 'to buy' > yačča'ša 'to be bought'
yažišba 'to make sbdy drink' > yaččažašba 'to be made to drink'

Reciprocals

A further verbal derivation is the reciprocal, which is used for actions that one does for each other. Its marker is a single or double m preposed to the underived stem.

yuwah 'to bring' > yammuwah 'to get together'
yinnah 'to say' > yamnawah 'to talk together, to discuss'

Sometimes a reciprocal verb has the characteristic marker, even if no corresponding simple stem exists.

yammərwaš 'to get married' (*yurwaš non-existent)
yamkannaah 'to agree' (*yikannaah non-existent)

Agent nouns

Agent nouns can be derived from most action verbs by am- or an- prefix.⁷ They denote people who do the action either habitually or, for instance, as their profession.

yuyra 'to read' > əməyri 'a person who reads a lot'
yassuyra 'to teach' > amsuyri 'a teacher'

⁷ In some Zenaga speakers' folklore, this marker serves as proof of the close affinity of Zenaga to the languages spoken in Yemen (apparently Modern South Arabian languages), where am- serves as the definite article.

yittar ‘to ask for sth’ > amattər ‘a person who asks all the time’
yu’gar ‘to steal’ > amu’gar ‘a thief’
yirmaš ‘to take, to hold, to seduce’ > anarmiš ‘a seducer’

Feminine agent nouns are derived from the corresponding masculine by a t- prefix and a change of the word ending (a -t suffix or a sound change).

amu’gar ‘a thief (masc.)’ > tamu’gart ‘a thief (fem.)’
anawuš ‘a helper (masc.)’ > tanawus ‘a helper (fem.)’

Sometimes a single stem can have even several derived agent nouns, which can also denote places or moments of the action.

yuyra ‘to study’ > anayri’ð ‘a school’
yaššilla ‘to pray’ > anθalli’ð ‘a mosque’
yajija ‘to be born’ > anjiji ‘the moment of birth’

Instrumental nouns

Names of instruments can also be derived from verbs with the noun marker a- followed by š, which probably is historically related to the preposition š, equally denoting instrumental use.

yirmaš ‘to hold’ > aššarməš ‘a handle (of a tool)’
yuxtaš ‘to cut’ > aššaxtəš ‘a saw’

Verbal nouns

To complementize a verb, verbal nouns similar to Arabic mašdars can be derived from them. Many verbal nouns are nearly identical to the plain stem, sometimes with the characteristic feminine markers before and after the stem.

yakšum ‘to enter’ > ukšum ‘entering’
yuḏar ‘to fall’ > uḏur ‘falling’
yirmaš ‘to hold’ > trams ‘holding’
yuyjaah ‘to wait’ > tɣajat ‘waiting’

Verbal and adjectival diminutives

As in Hassaniya, diminutives can be formed from verbs and adjectives to signify smallness, delicateness, or with positive qualities even some kind of superlative. The diminutive form is usually formed by changing the first vowel within the word stem from a to ay.⁸

yarmašša > yarmayšša	‘kind’ > ‘particularly kind’ (verb)
yajmandar > yajmayndar	‘beautiful’ > ‘pretty, cute’ (verb)
mallij > mayllij	‘white’ > ‘whitish’ (adjective)

8 The exact same morpheme is often used even in Hassaniya, e.g. mitšaddil ‘kind’ > mitšayddil ‘particularly kind’.

Syntax

Copula, existence and possession

Unlike in Arabic, linking a pronoun or a noun to another noun requires an explicit copula, which is invariable in number and gender.

ni'k aḏ abbajmuḏ	'I am (a) student.'
ijjan-aan aḏ iḏačfaya	'Those men are teachers.'
ayḏ aḏ tamawhart-i'n	'This is my house.'

In interrogative sentences, this copula is not expressed.

ta'k kuk	'Who (are) you?'
ma'hag arabih	'Where (is) the child?'

With some question words, a pronoun subject is expressed through an object suffix on the question word.

ma'hag-ki	'Where (are) you?'
ma'ha-ḏi	'Where (is) he?'

For negation of the 3rd person singular, a contracted form waygi (< *war yigi) of the negative preterite of the verb yiga 'to become' is used. For other persons, the verb is inflected as expected.

ayḏ waygi tət	'That is not true.'
war igag a'rib	'I am not a warrior.'

Similarly to the Hassaniya verb ʕaad 'to become', yiga is used even in other syntactic contexts as a suppletive form of the copula.

agi anažbar	'Be the first!' (imperative)
wall ittiggi amu'gar	'He will not be / become a thief.' (aorist intensive)
šawah aḏ yiga	'Whatever it may be.' (preterite)

For existence, the verb yu'j 'to exist' with the 3rd person masc. sg. object pronoun -ti is used. The object pronoun is invariable but the subject marker changes according to the object described.

yu'l-li arabih	'There is a boy.'
tu'l-li ta'kšah	'There is a problem'
u'jan-ti aanan	'There are tents.'
u'ja-ḏi	'I exist.'
war-ti yu'j aḏərfi	'There is no money.'
war-ti tu'j taqwaḏ	'There is no strength.'

For locative phrases, the verb yaa' 'to be somewhere' is used.

ijj yaa' tamawhart-iš	'(The) man is in his house.'
aa'yag Nwaakšuuṭ	'I am in Nouakchott.'
yaa' afu'š-iš aššaḏj	'There is a bowl in his hand.' (lit. is:in his hand bowl)

For possession, there are several near-synonymous verbs, of which yinšag ‘to be in someone’s possession’ is probably the most common. The verb’s subject is the possessed item whereas the possessor is marked as the direct object. This verb is mostly used for temporary possession.

yinšag-i’n aθčab	“A book is in my possession”, i.e. ‘I have a book (right now).’
tinšag-i’n taɣayart	“A baby goat is in my possession”, i.e. ‘I have a baby goat.’
inšagan-ti itsan	“Clothes are in his possession”, i.e. ‘He has clothes.’

The verb yuḏḏaf ‘to own’ is close to the meaning of yinšag but syntactically it takes the possessor as its subject and the possessed as its direct object.

yuḏḏaf taatən	‘He has sheep’, ‘He owns sheep.’
uḏḏaffag iin	‘I have a tent’, ‘I own a tent.’
uḏḏaffan ugθaan	‘They have children.’

A third verb yija ‘to have’ is mostly used for so-called inalienable possession, i.e. to talk about things that are linked to the possessor permanently such as relationships with other people, body parts, or permanent qualities.

ijag awgθi	‘I have a son.’
yija maray iḏuyḏan	‘He has ten fingers.’

Questions

Yes/no questions are often marked only by intonation. Like in Hassaniya, the general pattern seems to be a high tone for the beginning part of the sentence, followed by an extra high on the last stressed syllable and an abrupt drop to low for the remaining syllables.

təššaawajaḏ š aawaj əññ uθnagan?	‘Do you speak Zenaga?’
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For clarity’s sake, yes/no questions can be preceded by the particle ayš, to which pronominal objects are attached directly.

ays-si tirmaššaḏ?	‘Do you take him / it?’
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Indirect yes/no questions are marked by the invariable particle (aj)jumra, derived from the auxiliary verb yumra ‘to have done’ (perfect tense).

war issinag jumra yaa’ daaḏ	‘I don’t know if he is here.’
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Wh-questions with subjects take the verb in the participle form.

maḏ yaa’n daaḏ?	‘Who is here?’ (preterite participle)
maḏ yaḏbaan?	‘Who left?’ (preterite participle)
maḏ yayḏbaan?	‘Who is traveling?’ (aorist intensive participle)
kayḏ yamušša’n?	‘What happened?’ (preterite participle)
mad-di yuzzu’ran?	‘Who saw him?’ (preterite participle)

Wh-questions with objects take the verb in finite forms.

kayḏ taskaraḏ?	‘What did you do?’ (preterite)
kayḏ tisakkaraḏ?	‘What are you doing?’ (aorist intensive)

kayð tuggað? 'What do you want?' (preterite)

Oblique questions take interrogative words with incorporated prepositions.

kaaš tayllaað? 'What are you looking for?' (preposition š)
kaaf ti'mað? 'What did you sit on?' (preposition o'f)
kawr yaygga? 'To where is he going?' (preposition dawran)
maar-ti tažžinžað? 'To whom did you sell it?' (indirect object)

Many questions are formed with the general interrogative word ta'k / ma'k 'which'.

ta'k awð / ma'k awð 'When?' (lit. which moment)
ta'k all 'Where?' (lit. which place)
ta'k ašk-iš 'How is he?' (lit. which state of his)

Other question words exist as well, some with an incorporated interrogative element wah, others formed of noun phrases.

yuuwah / iiwah 'Why?'
šawan / šah 'For how much?'
tajma n ayð 'Like what?'

For complex questions, the question word is often relativized and the verbal phrase introduced with the copula að.

ta'k aθčab að tiyarað 'Which book are you reading?' (lit. which book is you:read)
ta'k all að tukkað 'Which way did you come?' (lit. which place is you:passed)
ta'k ayð að-ki yaagan 'What hurts you?' (lit. what that is-you hurting?)

For polite questions used for instance in greetings, the question word arð 'I hope...' can be used.

arð aθal? 'I hope there is goodness.'

Relative clauses and qualifiers

Relative clauses for conceptually definite nouns are usually introduced by the medial demonstrative i'ð. For indefinite nouns, the demonstrative is left out. If the subject is relativized, the verb takes the participle form, similarly to Wh questions.

ijj yaðbaan 'a man who left' (preterite participle)
ijj-i'ð yaðbaan 'the man who left'
ijj yayðbaan 'a man who is traveling' (aorist intensive participle)
ijj-i'ð yayðbaan 'the man who is traveling'

The same construction is also used for qualifying adjectives.

ijj maşkan 'a small man' (m. sg. participle)
aman šammuðnan 'cold water' (m. pl. participle)

For relativized subjects with a negative verb, the participle marker -an is suffixed to the negative particle war whereas the verb is always in the 3rd person masculine. The negative particle never takes an additional plural suffix, i.e. the singular and the plural are indistinguishable.

ijj waran mašk	‘a man who is not small’
ijj-i’ð waran yaðbaah	‘the man who did not leave’
ijj-i’ð waran yayðbaah	‘the man who is not travelling’
ijjan-i’ð waran yaðbaah	‘the men who did not leave’

For relativized objects, finite verbs are used, as in Wh questions. Unlike in Arabic, an anaphoric pronoun is not needed.⁹

ijj-i’ð uzza’rag	‘the man whom I saw’
ijj-i’ð tissanað	‘the man whom you know’

For oblique relative clauses, a particle with an incorporated preposition is used. Not all prepositions are distinct in their relative forms.

a’ll-i’ð aaf i’mag	‘the place where I sat down’ (preposition o’f)
ajmošši-’ð aaš xattaššag	‘the knife with which I cut’ (preposition š)
ijj-i’ð aar taššaawajað	‘the man to whom you spoke’ (indirect object)
a’ll-i’ð aar ajjiag	‘the place where I was born’ (preposition dag)
tfarakt-i’ð aar ubḃagag	‘the town from where I went far’ (preposition a’r)
tinišçimt-i’ð aar tuddugag	‘the woman with whom I go together’ (preposition ið)

For relativized possessives, an Arabic-like construction with ayš ‘that’ plus an anaphoric pronoun later in the sentence is used. The same construction can also be used to disambiguate prepositional referents in complex relatives.

tammi’ðarah ayš i’šsuwi’-š að tuð	‘vision, whose organ is the eye’ (lit. vision which its organ is eye)
trabiin-ið ayš tahḃað tiššiiwijað ið-šiññað	‘those girls with whom you can talk’ (lit. those girls which you can talk with them)

A relative construction with the copula að is used to focalize the subject. As with other relativized subjects, the verb takes the participle form. This construction is used to answer questions with focus on the subject. In this construction, the participle is invariable.

mað yaššaawajan	‘Who spoke?’
nikni að yaššaawajan	Answer: ‘We are the ones who spoke.’

For headless relatives referring to concepts, the word ayð ‘that’ is used.

askir ayð tiirað	‘Do what you want.’
yinšag-tan ayð tatta’n	‘They have what to eat.’

For headless relatives referring to individualized actors, the possessive particle n + VP or the particle að + VP is used.

in yama’r-tan	‘the one who is oldest of them’
að yaθriin	‘the latter’

Expressing time

⁹ In Arabic, relativized objects are often referred to by an anaphoric pronoun in the relative clause: ar-rajulu llaḃii ‘aḃrifu-hu ‘the man that I know him’, i.e. ‘the man that I know’.

Punctual actions in the past are marked with the preterite. For emphasis, the verb *yumra* ‘to have done’ (Hassaniya *vaat*) can be used. Combined with the particle *aññin* ‘ever’, it conveys the idea of the present perfect (Hassaniya *gaṭṭ*). To express the idea of ‘never’, *aññin* is paired with the negative particle *war*.

<i>yaḍbaah</i>	‘He left.’ (Hassaniya <i>mša</i>)
<i>yumra yaḍbaah</i>	‘He already left.’ (Hassaniya <i>vaat mša</i>)
<i>yumra aññin yaḍbaah</i>	‘He has gone.’ (Hassaniya <i>gaṭṭ mša</i>)
<i>war aññin yaḍbaah</i>	‘He has never gone.’ (Hassaniya <i>maa gaṭṭ mša</i>)
<i>umrag aḍbaag</i>	‘I already left.’
<i>umrag aññin aḍbaag</i>	‘I have gone.’
<i>war aññin aḍbaag</i>	‘I have never gone.’

For continuous actions in the past or present, the aorist intensive is used. To place the action unambiguously in the past, the Hassaniya-derived auxiliary *kaan* can be used. In Zenaga, it is conjugated like in Hassaniya but it has maintained an older pronunciation with /u/ instead of /i/.

<i>yayḍbaah</i>	‘He was traveling’, ‘He is traveling’ or ‘He will travel’.
<i>kaan yayḍbaah</i>	‘He was traveling.’
<i>ayḍbaag</i>	‘I was traveling’, ‘I am traveling’ or ‘I will travel’.
<i>kunt ayḍbaag</i>	‘I was traveling.’

To further emphasize continuity of action, the verb *yaššij* ‘still’ can be added before the main verb. It can even stand by itself as a sort of copula. In the negative, it means ‘not anymore’.

<i>ašjag daaḍ</i>	‘I am still here.’
<i>yaššij yitta’raar</i>	‘He is still playing.’
<i>wall iššij o’f išk-iš</i>	‘He is not what he used to be.’ (lit. he’s not in his state anymore)
<i>wall iššij yittuurih</i>	‘He is not working anymore.’

Another similar verb is *yuktaj* ‘to continue, to keep on doing’, which seems to correspond semantically to the Hassaniya verb *itam*.

<i>awktij o’f išk-ik</i>	‘Be as you were.’ (a wish for good health as one is leaving)
<i>askag ayš uktajag daaḍ</i>	‘I prefer to stay here.’
<i>war ukčag ayš uktijag tuurig</i>	‘I don’t want to continue working.’

Even for future actions, the aorist intensive can be used. To place the action unambiguously in the future, the verb *yanha(ja)* can be added for emphasis. To express ‘never more’, the particle *ḍasčan* can be added to the negative form.

<i>yanha yayḍbaah</i>	‘He will go.’ (Hassaniya <i>laahi yəmši</i>)
<i>wall ənhi yayḍbaah ḍasčan</i>	‘He will never go anymore.’
<i>anhag ayḍbaag</i>	‘I will go.’

In all of these constructions, if the second verb takes a pronominal object, the copula particle *aḍ* is added in between the two verbs to facilitate the syntactic construction with objects attached directly to it. The copula is used even with invariable particles like *aññin*.

war ańńin ađ-k uzzu'rag 'I have never seen you (m. sg.)'

Expressing states

For verbs expressing states or mental actions, the default tense for present states is the preterite. The aorist intensive can also be used but then it often refers to a more continuous state, a habit or a future state.

aarag aθərfi	'I want money.' (preterite)
ittaarag aθərfi	'I always want money', 'I love money'. (aorist intensive)
yarmašša	'He is kind.' (preterite)
yittirməšši	'He will be kind (later).' (aorist intensive)

To express a change of state, the preterite can sometimes suffice but to disambiguate, the Hassaniya-derived auxiliary ʕaad 'to become' can also be used.

ʕadt aa'yag ńifrarən 'I started living in Niefrar.'

Modal expressions

As in Arabic, verbs belonging to the same verbal phrase are all conjugated for subject, unlike some other languages of the region such as Pulaar, and often even Tamasheq, where infinitives are used. As with other verbs expressing states, the modal verb is usually in the preterite whereas the subsequent verb ("main verb") takes the aorist.¹⁰

aarag aktubag	'I want to write'
taarađ taktubađ	'you (sg.) want to write'
yaara yaktub	'he wants to write'
war ahđag uzzu'rag	'I can't see'
war tahđađ tuzzu'rađ	'you (sg.) can't see'
wall ahađ yuzzu'r	'he can't see'

Similarly to time expressions, the copula ađ is added between the two verbs if the latter has a pronominal object.

war ahđag ađ-k uzzu'rag	'I can't see you (m. sg.)'
wall ahađ ađ-ki yuzzu'r	'He can't see you (m. sg.)'

Some modal verbs take only full clauses as complements, introduced by the particle ayš. If the verb has pronominal complements, they are attached directly to the conjunction.

askag ayš illagag daađ	'I prefer to stay here' (preterite in the subordinate clause)
askag ayz-za tiššađ tnazzat	'I prefer you to come in the morning' (preterite)

For some impersonal modal particles such as ajiiri 'must', the subject of the following verb might be marked with a possessive ending.¹¹ To express a habitual activity, the particle can be followed by aar + aorist intensive.

¹⁰ In this, the aorist is somewhat similar to the subjunctive in Arabic, where beside a form like yaktub-u 'he writes', a modal expression would be expressed yuriidu 'an yaktub-a 'he wants to write'.

¹¹ This is similar to a corresponding construction in Hassaniya: yaalla yišri or yaallt-u yišri 'He must buy.'

ajjiiri ya'ši / ajjiiri-š ya'ši 'he must buy'
 ajjiiri na'ši / ajjiiri-nna'n na'ši 'we must buy'
 ajjiiri aar nittatta 'we must eat regularly'

Subordinate clauses

Simple conditionals are expressed with the conjunction ađ 'if', which is usually followed by the aorist.

ađ yaktub... 'if he writes...'
 ađ akšumag... 'if I go in...'

Similarly to the negative particle war, all the pronominal and directional arguments of the verb follow ađ directly, often with sound assimilations on the morpheme boundary.

yišša-ddah 'he came'
 ad-da yašši 'if he comes...'
 tužza'rad-di 'you saw him'
 ad-di tužzu'rađ 'if you see him...'
 askara-'g-tađ 'I did it (f.) for you (m. sg.)'
 ađ-aag-tađ askirag 'if I do it (f.) for you (m. sg.)...'

If there are several words to which the verb's arguments could attach, they are always mentioned as early as possible.

war-ti tužzu'rađ 'you didn't see him'
 ad-di war tužzu'rađ 'if you don't see him'

Sometimes ađ can be used to mean 'so that, in order to'. Even in this case, it is followed by the aorist.

okšar-đah ađ naššalli 'Get off (the car) so that we (can) pray.'
 yinn-aaš ađ yuurih 'He told him to work.'

Another particle, aaš / haanəš 'so that, in order to' is followed by the aorist intensive. Similarly to ađ, it is directly followed by verb complements.

yuffag-aaš aman aaš yiθassa 'He poured him water to drink.'
 uurih aaš-aag razžamag 'Work so that I'll pay you!'

With some verbs, no particle is needed to connect the two verbs, of which the latter is in the aorist intensive.

yađbaah yayllaah š awgθiiš 'He went to look for his son.'

For temporal expressions in the past, allaar and a'đ ayš 'when' are practically synonymous.

allaar-d iššag... 'When I came...'
 a'đ ayš uzža'rag awgθii'n 'When I saw my son...'

For future actions and general truths, the conjunction o'gđ aar 'when' is used. The resulting action is expressed in the aorist or the preterite.

o'gđ aar yaṃṃih ayžžir, arθuma'g 'When the month ends, I'll pay you.' (lit. dies)
tura'n ta'wariññađ o'gđ aar da'g-šiññađ yukšam alhawaa
'Lungs fill up when air enters them.'

To express the idea of two simultaneous actions or states, two semi-verbal particles ajjukka and a'čija 'while' are used. They take subject suffixes but no prefixes.

ni'k war uffag ajjukkaḡ tuurag 'I am not free while I'm working.'
ajjukka ađ amyār, war-ti nuθri 'While he has been the chief, we haven't seen him.'
war ađ tiššiiwijaḡ ajjukka'm tiyara'm 'Do not speak while you (m. pl.) are studying!'
nikni nittuurih a'čijađ kuk titkunfiyađ 'We work while you (m. sg.) rest.'

For more temporal precision, different particle combinations, usually including either ađ or ayš, can be used to delimit the time frame of the action.

aṃoftin ad-dah yišša, wall ičši awđđi 'Since he came, he hasn't eaten anything.'
yawrah aar ađ yuftar 'He worked until he got tired.'
abđaaḡ ayžbaran ayz-zah yittašša 'I left before he would come.'
yišša-ddah darađ ayš tađbaađ 'He came after you left.'

For counterfactual possibilities about the past, the conjunction am / ham + preterite can be used. The following clause is expressed in the aorist.

am-dah yišša tnazzat, yuzžu'r aymaaš 'If he had come in the morning, he would have seen his brother.'
am-dah wall išši tnazzat, wall uzžu'r aymaaš 'If he hadn't come in the morning, he wouldn't have seen his brother.'

To express cause, several particle combinations are possible, including o'f ayš, aan ayš, bii-h ayš (derived from Hassaniya) and ša'r-iš ayš. A similar conjunction is ađ aar ayš 'since'.

... o'f ayš-i'đ yuwah '...because he hit me'
... aan ayš-aag innag '...because I told you'
... ša'r-i'n ayš war uffag '...because I am not free'
ađ aar ays-sađ tuzža'rađ 'since you (sg.) saw her..'

To complementize a full clause, the particle ayš is used by itself.

issanag ayš kuk ađ amajjawkuč-i'n 'I know that you are my friend.'
yissan ays-si issanag 'He knows that I know him.'
ađmaag ayš aman uryan 'I think that the water is hot.'

Coordination

A variety of particles, many of which are derived from Hassaniya, can be used to coordinate clauses.

issana-ki yayayr uyjjig išm-ik 'I know you (m. sg.) but I've forgotten your name.'
nittuurih u niyara 'We work and study.'

tawžan đassa'n na'đ ta'raaran 'Children laugh or play.'

More or less the same particles can be used to coordinate noun phrases, as well, though iđ 'with' is usually preferred over u 'and'.

tawkčađ i aman na'đ i'ž 'Do you prefer water or milk?'
i'šag šijman iđ tfi'žžih 'I bought fish and meat.'

Numeral constructions and quantifiers

Numbers generally precede the noun and agree with it in gender. Plural nouns are used with all lower numbers except 1. Unlike Arabic and Hassaniya, there are no separate dual forms. Numerals used with nouns differ from self-standing numbers, since they coalesce with the historical marker for the construct state (y- for plurals).

yu'n aji'm	'one he-camel'	ču'wat tajim't	'one she-camel'
šiññ i'jman	'two he-camels'	šināt ti'jmin	'two she-camels'
karaj i'jman	'three he-camels'	karđat ti'jmin	'three she-camels'
akkuz i'jman	'four he-camels'	akkuθat ti'jmin	'four she-camels'
šammuš i'jman	'five he-camels'	šammušat ti'jmin	'five she-camels'
šuđəš i'jman	'six he-camels'	šuđəšat ti'jmin	'six she-camels'
iššay i'jman	'seven he-camels'	iššayat ti'jmin	'seven she-camels'
ittamy i'jman	'eight he-camels'	ittamat ti'jmin	'eight she-camels'
tuθay i'jman	'nine he-camels'	tuθayat ti'jmin	'nine she-camels'
maray i'jman	'ten he-camels'	marayat ti'jmin	'ten she-camels'

With higher numbers, the noun takes the singular form, as in Arabic, and is preceded by the genitive particle n.

taššinda n ašš 'twenty days'
timađi n ašš 'one hundred days'

The question word mannag 'how many', which can also mean 'several', is inflected similarly to numbers.

mannay i'jman 'how many he-camels, several he-camels'
mannayat ti'jmin 'how many she-camels, several she-camels'

For conceptually definite noun phrases, the noun precedes the number. Number 2 has a particular form used in these constructions. To emphasize definiteness, the demonstrative pronoun a'đ + possessive particle is often added at the end of the phrase.

aḡuss-iš tišnih 'his two hands'
dalḡawaas šammuš-a'đ-šan 'the five senses'

The same construction is also used to link a number to a pronoun.

nikni tišn-a'đ-nag 'the two of us'
nitni karđ-a'đ-kuun 'the three of you'
nihni okkuθ-a'đ-šan 'the four of them'

For higher numbers, verification is needed. Tamasheq has *māraw iwētyan d-ěssin* “ten years and two”, Tashelhit *sin d mraw n usgg* “two and ten of year” for ‘12 years’.

For ordinal numbers, Zenaga has two alternative constructions: noun derivations similar to agent nouns and a possessive construction with *n + number*.

<i>anažbar</i>	‘the first’		
<i>intassin</i>	‘the second’	<i>tarbaḍ in tišnih</i>	‘the second girl’
<i>amakkard</i>	‘the third’	<i>tarbaḍ in karaḍ</i>	‘the third girl’
<i>amaguḍ</i>	‘the fourth’	<i>tarbaḍ in okkuḍ</i>	‘the fourth girl’

For fractions, some lower numbers have their own noun pattern. For higher numbers, a possessive construction is used, similar to ordinals.

<i>ufčih</i>	‘a half’
<i>wakkarḍah</i>	‘a third’
<i>wawgḍah</i>	‘a fourth’
<i>in šammuš</i>	‘a fifth’

To talk about the number of times an action has been undertaken, a simple prepositional phrase with *iḍ* ‘with’ + number is used.

<i>iḍ čuwa’ḍ</i>	‘once’
<i>iḍ šinan</i>	‘twice’
<i>iḍ karaḍ</i>	‘three times’
<i>iḍ okkuḍ</i>	‘four times’

For other expressions of quantity, the most common construction is *quantifier + n + noun*, although some quantifiers are used without the possessive marker. Expressions for ‘all’ are often made with a resumptive pronoun.

<i>kaara n ayḍajmuḍan</i>	‘some students’
<i>axxuut in buuru</i>	‘a little bread’
<i>aguulliž in tfi’žžih</i>	‘a lot of meat’
<i>its iñ maan</i>	‘some people’
<i>kuug aara</i>	‘all the time’, i.e. ‘often’
<i>akkuugi ašš</i>	‘every day’
<i>akkulli miin</i>	‘every person’
<i>aḍčab koll-iš</i>	‘the whole book’ (lit. book all of it)
<i>arabaan o’f awan-šan</i>	‘all the boys’ (lit. boys on their totality)

Negative quantifiers are always preceded by the word *waygi* ‘is not’.

<i>wayg awḍḍi</i>	‘nothing’
<i>wayg aḍḍar</i>	‘nothing’
<i>waygi miin</i>	‘no one’

Indefinite demonstratives can be used for undefined referents.

yuff-aaš waḍan kaarah ‘Someone gave him something.’